DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 462 096 JC 020 162

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TITLE Institutional Attendance Patterns of Students Transferring from Area Two-Year Colleges to The University of Memphis. ASHE Annual Meeting Paper.
PUB DATE 1998-11-00
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education (23rd, Miami, FL, November 5-8, 1998).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Persistence; Associate Degrees; *College Attendance; College Graduates; Community Colleges; *Educational Objectives; *Outcomes of Education; Partnerships in Education; Transfer Programs; *Transfer Students; Two Year Colleges
IDENTIFIERS *University of Memphis TN

ABSTRACT

This document is a study on the attendance patterns of community college transfer students prior to their matriculation at The University of Memphis (Tennessee). The study focuses on three topics: (1) the percentage of community college students who transfer with associate degrees; (2) the students' patterns of institutional attendance, both in-state and out-of-state; and (3) differences in patterns of community college transfers' major and last two-year college attended. The study included 1,181 transfer students from four state community colleges; a random sample of 614 transfers were selected. The transfers were located in three main university majors: business, education, and nursing. Results included: (1) 27% of the sample population transferred with associate degrees; (2) 45% of the sample are reported as "multiple-transfers" who have attended two or more colleges or universities prior to enrolling; (3) 23% of the transfer students actually started at a four-year institution first; and (4) nursing and education were the most common community college majors for the transferring students. Overall, these patterns are shown to be common for most transfers. Other priorities like job mobility, family issues, and/or financial concerns were given as possible reasons for multiple transfers. The author suggests that these students should not so quickly be termed "dropouts." (MKF)

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ED 462 096

Institutional Attendance Patterns of Students Transferring from Area Two-Year Colleges to The University of Memphis

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Historically the two-year college has been viewed as the first rung on the ladder to a baccalaureate degree. The assumption is that students will begin at a two-year college and transfer vertically (ascend the ladder) to a four-year school after completing the associate's degree. Although many students do follow this pattern, there is increasing evidence this is an outdated paradigm for viewing two-year transfers. Rather, many students attend the two-year college as just of several institutions in a circuitous route to the baccalaureate, a route that includes frequent switching or transferring between institutions and sectors (Kearney, Townsend, & Kearney, 1995; Townsend & Dever, in press). Also, regardless of which route they take, many two-year transfers do not earn an associate's degree before transferring to a four-year school (Cohen & Brawer, 1996).

Purpose

The purpose of the study was to determine the extent to which two-year college transfers to The University of Memphis have attended more than one college prior to matriculating at the university. The objectives of the study were to (1) determine the percentage of students who transferred with an associate's degree, (2) determine patterns of institutional attendance, including in-state and out-of-state, and (3) look for differences in patterns by students' major and last two-year college attended.

Methodology

The population for the study was all University of Memphis students who (1) entered the university in Fall 1994 or subsequent semesters, (2) were still enrolled in the Spring 1998 semester, and (3) had accumulated at least 18 credit hours from one of four area two-year colleges. The decision to study students who had transferred in a certain number of hours as opposed to those who had completed a two-year degree was made partly because the university does not know which two-year college transfer students have an associate's degree and partly to demonstrate that many two-year transfers do not complete a degree before transferring. To ensure that the students had spent enough time at a two-year college for it to have influenced their academic development, attendance at a two-year school for at least 18 credit hours was deemed appropriate by an advisory group of two-year college and university representatives.

The two-year colleges in the study were Dyersburg State Community College

This paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education in Miami, Florida, in November, 1998, as part of the symposium "Reframing 'Student Transfer" in Higher Education: Implications for Policy and Research."

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(DSCC), Jackson State Community College (JSCC), Shelby State Community College (SSCC), and State Technical Institute of Memphis (STIM). DSCC and JSCC are rural community colleges, located within a 75 to 150-minute drive to the university. SSCC and STIM are both located in Memphis, within a 15-minute drive to the university. These four colleges were selected because in Fall1998 over 63% of the university's undergraduate transfers were from these schools, with almost 55% from just two of the colleges, SSCC and STIM (Office of Institutional Research, Fall 1998).

For each of these two-year colleges, the university's registrar provided to the researcher a list of university students who had transferred in 18 or more hours from that school. The population included 76 transfers from DSCC, 78 from JSCC, 596 from SSCC, and 431 from STIM for a total of 1, 181 students. A check of the programs in which these students were enrolled indicated that the three programs having the highest enrollment of two-year college transfers were in the Fogelman College of Business and Economics, the College of Education, and the Lowenberg School of Nursing. Students in these three majors were selected as the sample for this study. There were 290 business majors, 238 education majors, and 86 nursing majors for a total of 614 students (52% of the population). The sample included 45 students from DSCC, 33 from JSCC, 309 from SSCC, and 227 from STIM.

The transcript of each student was then downloaded and printed. Transcripts of the students from DSCC and JSCC (n = 78) were then reviewed to determine possible institutional attendance patterns prior to transfer to the university. The patterns that emerged were used to categorize each student in the sample.

Results

Adjusted sample. The assumption in selecting the population was that all the students had transferred from a two-year college to the university. Analysis of the transcripts indicated that 8 of the 614 students in the sample had actually matriculated at the university and earned 18 or more credits at a two-year school by attending it during the summer or simultaneously enrolling at both the university and a two-year school. Five of these students were business majors, one was an education major, and two were nursing majors. Another business major had attended four four-year colleges before matriculating at the university. He then earned 33 credits from STIM and 3 from SSCC through a combination of simultaneous enrollment and summer enrollment at one of the schools. These 9 students were omitted from the sample so that the adjusted sample size was 605 students. By major there were 284 business majors, 237 education majors, and 84 nursing majors. By previous two-year college, there were 45 students from DSCC, 33 from JSCC, 304 from SSCC, and 223 from STIM.

Percentage of transfers with associate degree. Each of the two-year colleges in the study provided information about which of their students in the sample had transferred with a degree. Over 50% (23 students) of DSCC's 45 transfers in the sample had an associate's degree, 12% (4) of JSCC's 33 transfers, 20% (61) of SSSC's 304 transfers, and 34% (76) of STIM's 233 transfers. Thus 27% (164) of students in the

sample transferred to the university with an associate's degree, which may have been an A.A., an A.S., or an A.A.S.

Patterns of institutional attendance. The following student categories were determined:

(1) Traditional-Age Vertical Transfer = Student who transferred to the university after attending one two-year college within nine months of graduating from high school or receiving a G.E.D. Attendance at the two-year school was usually for two to three years but may have taken place over 10 or more years. Also, there may been a break in college attendance of a few months to several years before the student transferred to the university.

2) Adult Vertical Transfer = Student who transferred to the university after attending one two-year college at least 12 months after graduating from high school or receiving a G.E.D.

(3) Lateral Vertical Transfer = Student who transferred to the university after attending two or more two-year colleges but no four-year school.

4) Reverse Transfer = Student who began at a four-year school and transferred to a two-year college before transferring to The University of Memphis. The student may have attended more than one four-year college before transferring to the two-year school and more than one two-year college before attending the university.

5) U of M Reverse Transfer = Student who began at The University of Memphis and transferred to one or more two-year colleges before transferring back to The University of Memphis.

(6) Other Patterns of Transfer = Student who transferred to The University of Memphis without following any of the above patterns. For example, the student may have transferred from one or more two-year colleges to a four-year college before transferring to The University of Memphis. Some students were vertical transfers to the University and then reverse transferred to the same two-year school before making another vertical transfer to the University.

(7) Summer Sessioner = Student who, after enrolling at The University of Memphis, attends a two-year college for one or more semesters to earn more credits to transfer back to the university.

(8) Simultaneous Enroller = Student who attends The University of Memphis and also enrolls at a two-year college during one or more semesters in which s/he is also enrolled at the university. The two-year college courses are transferred into the university upon their completion.

Collective patterns. The findings of this study indicate that as a group, the majority of the university's two-year college transfers do not fit the stereotypical profile of a community college transfer, that is, "one who enrolls in college immediately after high school graduation, attends the community college for two years, and then transfers to the university" (Piland, 1995). As Table 1 indicates, only 36% (220 students) come close to fitting this profile. Another 15% (92 students) did attend only one two-year college but as older students, people who waited at least a year after graduating from college or completing their GED to begin their college education. When these two groups were combined, 52% (312) of the transfers in the study were vertical transfers: people who moved upwards to the four-year school by using the two-year school as the first rung on their educational ladder.

The rest of the students (48% or 293 students) had a more complicated path. Thirteen percent (81) first transferred laterally to another two-year college before transferring vertically to the university. Twenty-two percent (131) reversed the usual two-year to four-year transfer pattern. They began their undergraduate college enrollment at a four-year school but transferred at some point to a two-year college before transferring to the four-year University of Memphis. Eighteen of these reverse transfer students (3% of the sample) began at The University of Memphis. Additionally, 13% (81) demonstrated other institutional attendance patterns. With the exception of the reverse transfers who started at The University of Memphis, these students (275 or 45%) are "multiple-transfer students," defined by Kearney, Townsend, and Kearney (1995) as students "who had attended two or more colleges or universities prior to enrolling" (p. 235) at their current institution.

When attendance patterns of multiple-transfer students are examined to determine how many attended colleges only in Tennessee, the results indicate that 180 of (65%) attended Tennessee higher education institutions only (see Table 2). This group of students was almost evenly distributed by type of transfer pattern, ranging from 64% of reverse transfers to 68% of lateral transfers. Within the majors, there was more variation. For example, reverse transfer nursing students were the least apt to have gone to college only in Tennessee (38%).

Attendance patterns by major. As Table 1 illustrates, traditional-age students who attended only one two-year college before transferring to the university were most likely to be education majors (43% of education transfers in the study). Nursing majors were the least likely to be traditional-age vertical transfers (29% of the nursing transfers) but the most likely to be adult vertical transfers (19%). Nursing majors were also the most likely to have attended at least two two-year schools before attending the university (19%) and the least likely to have been reverse transfers (15%). Nursing majors were also the most apt to have followed other patterns of institutional attendance (17%). Business majors were the most apt to have started at The University of Memphis, dropped out to transfer to a two-year school, and then transferred back to the university (04%).

Attendance patterns by previous two-year college. As indicated in Table 3, transfers from the urban SSCC were the least apt to be traditional-age vertical transfers (32% of its transfers as compared to 40% or higher for the other three two-year schools). Transfers from the rural JSCC were the least apt to be adult vertical transfers, older students who transferred to the university after attending only one two-year school (6% as compared to 15% to 18% for the other schools). Transfers from the rural DSCC were the least apt to be reverse transfers (7% as compared to 13 to 25% elsewhere).

Continued enrollment at two-year colleges. As Table 1 indicates, once the transfers enrolled at the university, some continued to accumulate and transfer two-year college credits either through summer enrollment at a two-year college or simultaneous enrollment at both colleges (80 students or 13% of the sample). At least five percent (29) of the total sample were summer sessioners at one of the four area two-year colleges, and eight percent (51 students) simultaneously enrolled at a local two-year college, usually STIM or SSCC, and the university. Some of the simultaneous enrollment occurred during the summer, but the students were counted only as simultaneous enrollers. About the same percentage of students in each major were summer sessioners (4 to 5%), but education majors were least apt to be simultaneous enrollers (06% as compared to 10% to

11% in the other majors).

Discussion and Implications

That almost half (45%) of the students in the study were multiple-transfer students, students who had attended at least three higher education institutions in their pursuit of a baccalaureate, illustrates the heavy traffic of students among institutions. This finding is not unique to the university in this study. In a similar study, Piland (1995) found that 37% of two-year college transfers to San Diego State University were multiple-transfers. Kearney, Townsend, and Kearney (1995) also found that 44% of undergraduate transfers to the University of Illinois at Chicago in Fall 1989 were multiple transfers.

Several factors have contributed to the heavy interinstitutional traffic. One is the increasing mobility of the American populace. According to Clark (1982), "What looks like questionable academic 'instability' is actually a stable sensible phenomenon of going to school wherever you are" (p. 166). Doing so is facilitated by the second reason, the abundance of institutional options available to students. Because of the extensive growth of the public sector of higher education since the 1950s, students in most locales typically have several colleges and universities geographically accessible and can switch among them. The abundance of colleges in a given locale also facilitates another pattern in student enrollment: simultaneous enrollment at two institutions during a given semester. Slark (1982) identified this practice in her study of reverse transfers at Santa Ana College in California and called these students "expediters" (p. 6).

When students expedite their baccalaureate attainment in this way or by taking summer courses at a two-year college and transferring the credits back to the university, they partake of the two-year college curriculum, even though they are officially four-year college students. Knowing this makes development of course-by-course equivalency guides as well as articulation agreements for entire programs increasingly important, not only for would-be two-year college transfers but also for current university students.

Similarly, given the extent of transfer among institutions because of simultaneous enrollment, attendance elsewhere during summer sessions, and the other transfer patterns documented in this study, there is also some "pragmatic justification for the distributive model of general education curricula, as opposed to those which currently emphasize a cohesive, four-year sequence" (Kearney, Townsend, & Kearney, 1995, p. 341). Efforts to establish and maintain distinctive general education curricula probably succeed best in colleges with little transfer flow.

This study also illustrates how students' institutional attendance patterns are often at variance with institutional leaders and policy makers" perspectives of how students should behave. From an institutional perspective, students who transfer out of the institution are sometimes labeled "dropouts," a term that conjures up the image of someone who couldn't make the grade academically and/or socially. However, from the students' perspective, their transfer helps them stay in higher education because they find a better institutional fit. Much like television viewers, students seem to stay at one institution (channel) for as long as it meets their needs and then switch to another college (channel) deemed better able to suit their purposes. Given this reality, institutional leaders currently focusing on what predisposes a student to leave might better focus on retaining

those most likely to stay rather than "channel switch" among institutions.

The findings also have implications for policymakers bent on determining institutional accountability through such measures as performance-based funding. For example, under Tennessee's performance-based funding formula, institutions are rewarded for the performance of their students on various standardized tests such as the College BASE examination. At The University of Memphis seniors must take this test as an exit examination in general education the semester before they graduate. The implicit assumption behind these exams is that students' performance on them reflects the quality of their education at the four-year school from which they graduate. Although this assumption is valid for native students, for transfer students the reality is far more complex. At least one other institution besides the graduating one has contributed to the student's performance and accumulation of credits toward the baccalaureate. Although the data for students who transfer in credits can be analyzed separately, often it is not (Dan Poje, Director of Academic Programs and Assessment, The University of Memphis, personal conversation, September 30, 1998). Thus the extent to which transfer students' scores reflect knowledge gained at the university is not clear.

The lack of any startling differences in institutional attendance patterns by major or previous two-year college attended suggests these patterns may be typical for students who attend a two-year college prior to transferring to a university such as The University of Memphis. However, not all colleges and universities have students with such varied attendance patterns. Rather, the generalizability of these findings is probably limited to other urban, moderately selective, commuter institutions like The University of Memphis. For example, Bach et al (1998) found in their study of student attendance patterns within selected public postsecondary institutions in Portland, Oregon, that, as in this study, only 52% of the two-year transfer students followed the linear vertical transfer pattern. The availability of institutional options in an urban area contributes to the likelihood students will switch back and forth among institutions. Also, not all institutions attract (or welcome) two-year college transfers. For example, the highly selective, residential, private liberal arts Rhodes College in Memphis had no two-year college transfers enrolled in 1997-98 and only two in 1994-1998. However, Rhodes students do attend other colleges during the summer and transfer back the hours in the fall. These colleges might be two-year schools (Bill Berg, Director of Institutional Research, Rhodes College, personal communications, September 8, 1998).

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Table 1. Summary Table of Institutional Attendance Patterns by Major

Pattern	Business		Education		Nursing		Total	
	No.	% within major	No.	% within major	No.	% within major	No.	% within sample
Traditional-Age Vertical Transfer	95	(33%)	101	(43%)	24	(29%)	220	(36%)
Adult Vertical Transfer	47	(16%)	29	(12%)	16	(19%)	92	(15%)
Lateral Vertical Transfer	36	(12%)	30	(13%)	16	(19%)	81	(13%)
Reverse Transfer	55	(19%)	45	(19%)	13	(15%)	113	(19%)
U of M Reverse Transfer	11	(04%)	6	(02%)	1	(01%)	18	(03%)
Other Patterns	41	(14%)	26	(10%)	14	(17%)	81	(13%)
Total	284 (47%)*		237 (39%)*		84 (14%)*		605	(100%)**

* Percentage within sample
** Collective percentages total 100.

Summer Sessioner+	15	(05%)	10	(04%)	4	(05%)	29	(05%)
Simultaneous Enroller	28	(10%)	14	(06%)	9	(11%)	51	(08%)

+ The numbers and percentages are conservative since they do not include students who simultaneously enroll at The University and a two-year college during the summer. Rather, these students are classified as Simultaneous Enrollers.

Table 2. Multiple-Transfer Students Who Attended Tennessee Colleges Only

Transfer Pattern	Business		Education		Nursing		Total	
	No.	% within pattern for major	No.	% within pattern for major	No.	% within pattern for major	No.	% within pattern for sample
Lateral	22	(68%)	22	(73%)	11	(69%)	55	(68%)
Reverse	37	(67%)	30	(67%)	5	(38%)	72	(64%)
Other Patterns	25	(61%)	20	(67%)	8	(80%)	53	(65%)
TOTAL	84		72		24		180	(65%)

Table 3. Summary Table of Institutional Attendance Patterns by Two-Year College

Pattern	DSCC		JSCC		SSCC		STIM		Total	
	No.	% within DSCC trans.	No.	% within JSCC trans.	No.	% Within SSCC trans.	No.	% within STIM trans.	No.	% within sample
Traditional-Age Vertical Transfer	20	(44%)	14	(42%)	97	(32%)	88	(40%)	219	(36%)
Adult Vertical Transfer	6	(18%)	2	(06%)	49	(16%)	34	(15%)	93	(15%)
Lateral Vertical Transfer	8	(15%)	5	(15%)	44	(14%)	26	(12%)	82	(13%)
Reverse Transfer	3	(07%)	7	(18%)	75	(25%)	29	(13%)	114	(19%)
U of M Reverse Transfer	1	(02%)	1	(03%)	6	(02%)	10	(04%)	18	(03%)
Other Patterns	6	(13%)	5	(13%)	33	(11%)	35	(16%)	79	(13%)
Total	45 (07%)+		33 (05%)+		304 (50%)+		223 (37%)+		605 (100%)*	
Summer Sessioner+	0	(00%)	1	(03%)	18	(07%)	10	(04%)	29	(05%)
Simultaneous Enroller	1	(02%)	2	(06%)	23	(08%)	25	(11%)	51	(08%)

+ Percentage within sample
* Complete percentages total 100.

+ The numbers and percentages are conservative since they do not include students who simultaneously enroll at The University and a two-year college during the summer. Rather, these students are classified as Simultaneous Enrollers.